was the vehicle for much literary expression, and, possibly because it was less stereotyped than some of the traditional forms of literature, at times gave indication of real genius. Most of the greatest fiction had probably circulated for centuries in the form of collections of incidents pieced together by popular professional story-tellers and handed down by word of mouth. Some of these cycles had wide popular currency, were familiar to a large proportion of the population, and were retold again and again with many variations. Then some of them were put into writing, at first crudely. Eventually authors of outstanding ability took a few of them in hand, often anonymously (for composition of such tales, and especially in the vernacular, was supposed to be beneath the dignity of a scholar), and lasting masterpieces came into existence.

It must be noted, moreover, that the greatest of Chinese travel diaries, that by Hsu Hsia-k'o? dates from the Ming. Hsu, who lived toward the close of the dynasty, travelled extensively through the Empire, apparently chiefly for the love of doing so, and wrote detailed and vivid descriptions of rivers, mountains, buildings, and local customs. Particularly did he explore the Southwest, determining the source of the West River, showing that the Mekong and Salween are separate streams, and demonstrating that the Chin Sha Kiang, or River of the Golden Sand, is the upper reaches of the Yangtze.

The activities of the Ming writers seem to have been molded in part by the dominance of the civil service examinations. Since, as we have said, through these lay the road to official preferment and social recognition, and since they emphasized

a knowledge of the Classics and of the orthodox commentators, and form rather than content, their tendency was to restrict the minds subjected to them to pedestrian, laborious, and voluminous, but quite uninspired effort in the fields of history, government, and related subjects. Certainly the energies of Ming scholars were expended very largely on sober writings and compilations—among them being local geographies and histories, works of reference (although, interestingly enough, most of these were inferior to the compilations of Tang and Sung scholars), collections of inscriptions, descriptions of government, biographies, a long study of Ssii-ma Ch'ien's *Shik Chi,* treatises on military training and strat-